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NSC FOR ABRAMS/DORAN/MARCHESE/HARDING

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SUBJECT: LEBANON: SENIOR MEMBER OF PARLIAMENT CAUTIONS
AGAINST CHAPTER VII

Classified By: Ambassador Jeffrey D. Feltman. Reason: Section 1.4 (b)

11. (C) Senior MP Robert Ghanem, a moderate Maronite member of the March 14 movement and chairman of parliament's influential Judiciary Committee, told emboff on 3/14 that for the first time in months, he sees tentativeness in the actions of March 8th opposition forces. He said that Hizballah may be trying to please two masters that now have diverging agendas: while the Syrians are dead set against the Special Tribunal, the more strategic-minded Iranians are focused on the long-term goals of regional influence. Meanwhile, he sees indications that Michel Aoun's liabilities may finally be catching up to him. Ever since the Aounist catastrophe of 1/23 when Christian-on-Christian clashes caused considerable dismay within that community, Aoun has made only infrequent public appearances and appears to have no role whatsoever in the current efforts to resolve the political stalemate.

12. (C) For these reasons, MP Ghanem believes it is essential that Saad Hariri and the pro-reform March 14 movement stay the course and diligently engage with Nabih Berri, who serves as the virtual single-point-of-contact for the opposition, while possessing little actual decision-making authority. Unlike the fatalistic Samir Geagea (see Beirut 00384), Ghanem believes there is a real possibility that the opposition's commitment to unseat the Siniora government may be faltering and there may now be an opening for Lebanon's democratic forces to win the critical tribunal at an acceptable price.

TAKING ADVANTAGE OF TRENDS

13. (C) Ghanem, a well-respected, pro-reform independent whose father once commanded the Lebanese army, maintained that Lebanon's democratic movement should take advantage of the regional support that has been gradually building for Siniora (i.e. Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Jordan), as well as Syria's regionally unpopular intransigence, and steadily press for what are widely considered to be moderate demands: establishment of the tribunal, governance by majority, and long-overdue presidential elections conducted under a new made-in-Lebanon electoral law. Although the present negotiations are difficult and it often appears that Hizballah will never bend, it is far better than giving up the endeavor and throwing the future of Lebanon onto the UN Security Council by means of an appeal for Chapter VII action.

14. (C) The veteran lawmaker firmly believes that if the

Siniora government resorts to an appeal for a Chapter VII resolution, they would be playing into the hands of the Syria and Hizballah, who are just now beginning to realize that their positions are eroding. No matter how effective the diplomatic offensive is d to round up support in council, Ghanem (who has served in parliament since 1992) simply cannot believe that Russia will allow a resolution to pass.

15. (C) And in the event that a resolution is attempted and falls short, the Siniora government will have shot its last arrow, while arguably (according to Ghanem) conceding that it is incapable of governing/protecting the country on its own. It could provide credence to the long-implied Syrian contention that Lebanon cannot govern itself and needs Syria,s benevolent guidance. Rather than rush into Chapter VII, Ghanem said he is urging his fellow pro-reform colleagues that the movement should stay engaged with Berri and slog it out to reach an acceptable compromise. He argued that both Nasrallah and Berri are now on record as supporting the tribunal and it would be a missed opportunity to let them off that hook by shifting to the risky Chapter VII strategy.

LEBANON'S PARLIAMENT

16. (C) Concerning the long-recessed parliament, Ghanem suggested that Speaker Berri has painted himself into a corner by announcing he would not convene parliament because the Siniora government is "illegitimate." Ghanem said the constitution clearly states that no one but the parliament itself or the country's Constitutional Council can make that declaration -- and certainly not the Speaker by himself. Therefore, his refusal to convene the parliament for this reason puts Berri on very shaky ground.

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17. In closing, the lawmaker recommended that steady pressure by the pro-reform parliamentary majority starting on March 20 would be the best way to force a retreat by Berri. He also implied that Patriarch Sfeir, if asked, may issue a call that parliament be allowed to open, which would put added pressure on the politically astute Berri. Due to decidedly unsubtle Syrian pressure, Berri may prove stubborn, but nothing will save him from looking increasingly foolish if he continues to block the doors of the legislature. Ghanem's strong advice: give the Berri-Hariri negotiations time to work, and let March 20 become a date Berri begins to dread because of his irresponsible inaction.

FELTMAN